

## Naturalism and Religion

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One of the thornier problems for naturalism is how to understand religion and God. On the one hand, naturalism rests on the assumption that whatever there is, it is fully a natural entity. This means, among other things, that neither nature in general nor anything in or of it requires for its being or explanation anything that is not natural. This on the face of it rules out the possibility of any traditional conception of the divine wherein the divine is non-natural, or supernatural, or the cause of nature, or the sustainer of nature, or for that matter the redeemer of nature. So much, one would think, for God and religion.

The problem is “the other hand,” which is to say that if naturalism takes the view that whatever there is, it is fully encompassed within nature, then there seems to be a necessity to understand both God and religion as natural phenomena. Religion is certainly a reality, and naturalism must be able to understand it given its character and role within orders of nature. God is a trickier matter. If we say that there is a God that is the first cause, so to speak, whether in time or in being, then we have posited a non-natural entity and have moved outside of naturalism. If we say that there is a God but that God is fully a natural being then it is not clear that we are talking about the God which appears to motivate believers within the major monotheistic traditions. This fully natural God, for example, could not be a first cause in any sense.

One way around the problem of God is simply to deny God’s existence, i.e. to say that though millions of people assert and through history have asserted the existence of God, and claim in a wide range of ways to feel God’s presence in their lives, they are all simply wrong. It is of course possible that they are all wrong, in that there is no logical inconsistency with most people or even everyone holding a view that turns out to be false. And in fact a naturalist has to say something like this, i.e.

that the God in whom millions of people have believed and continue to believe does not now and never has existed.

But there remains something unsatisfactory about this because to talk about God in this way seems not to take account of the significance the belief in God has for many people. To talk about God's existence is not simply to make one more existential claim, on a par with, for example, talking about a monster in a child's closet. The meaning and significance for people's lives of the belief in the existence of God is a dimension or trait of God itself, and therefore God's existence can not be breezily waved aside without equally breezily waving aside the power that belief in God has. It is precisely here that the naturalist has to be careful; the power and significance of the belief in God is a dimension of the phenomenon that is to be accounted for on natural terms, and so cannot simply be dismissed.

The focus of this paper is to consider some of the many aspects of religion such that we understand them within a naturalist framework without simply dismissing them or distorting their character. This is important because one of the virtues of naturalism in general is that it is capable of encompassing the many dimensions of experience, and of nature generally, without the reductionism that is all too common in much of philosophy. It would not do simply to dismiss the belief in God as an illusion, as we have said. It will also not do simply to reduce religious commitment and faith to social or psychological conditions. Freud may or may not have been right that religion is an illusion, or that belief in God is a craving for a father figure, but even if he were right, religious belief and faith are too central to individuals, communities and societies to be explained away. It is more reasonable, and more consistent with the tenor of naturalism, to attempt to understand them, to the extent possible, on their own terms. That "their own terms" tend to be supernatural sets the philosophical challenge for us.

## **An Ordinal God**

Over the years there have been various approaches to an understanding of God and religion as natural phenomena. We shall stipulate, first, that God prevails, which is to say that there are sets of relations in nature, including experience, of which it is reasonable to say that God is a constituent. This is a rather bald acknowledgment, though, in that it says

nothing about the traits that we may reasonably ascribe to God. It says simply that there are ordinal locations of which God is a constitutive trait, which is a more technical way of saying simply that God prevails in some order or orders.<sup>1</sup> This may appear to beg the question of God's existence in that it seems to assert the very thing that is at issue when one asks whether God exists. First, as we will see again in the discussion of Santayana below, the question of God's existence has been given undue importance in that it misses the very senses in which God matters. Second, the term "existence" is in any case a tricky one. For us it has to mean simply prevalence in one or more orders of relations. When one asks whether God exists one is not simply asking whether there are any ordinal locations at all in which God prevails. We must rephrase the traditional question whether God exists, and ask whether God prevails in certain specific orders. To say, then, that God prevails in some order or orders is not necessarily to respond in the affirmative to the meaning and significance of the question whether God exists; it is not question-begging.

It does, however, assume that we cannot simply dismiss God altogether, if only because our experience refuses to allow it. God has been a factor in countless lives and events for thousands of years. Human history and individual lives would be radically different if there had not been a God motivating people to do this or that, or to act one way or another. From the rapturous to the despicable, God has been involved in much of what the human race has undergone, accomplished and committed.

Notice that we do not say that the concept of God has motivated people, but God itself. In doing so, are we not smuggling in through the back door a kind of ontological argument? Or less grandiosely, are we not equivocating between God and the concept of or belief in God? The answer is that we are not, and the reason we are not may be one of the more important philosophical points to be made here. First we should distinguish between concepts and beliefs. Concepts do not generally have much motivating power. For example, we might have a concept of right and wrong such that doing *x* is right and not doing *x* is wrong.

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<sup>1</sup> The general ontological perspective that frames this discussion is a relational, ordinal ontology associated with Justus Buchler. See Buchler 1966.

However, if when faced with having to choose between them we do  $x$ , we do so not because we have a specific concept of right and wrong in this case but because we have a commitment to doing right, or because we believe that doing right is the appropriate thing for us to do. It is the belief or commitment that has the motivating power in such a case, and not the concept. Similarly, if one were a Justice of the US Supreme Court and had a certain concept of the US Constitution one would rule in certain ways and not others. But it is not the concept that drives a judge as much as it would be a commitment to the Constitution as the foundational law of the country and the final arbiter of the legitimacy of state and federal law. The concept may provide the criterion for one's decision, but it is not what motivates.

The case is similar for religious motivation. It is not having the concept of God that inclines us to go to war or to make peace, to found a city or to follow a particular way of life. It seems more reasonable to say that belief or faith may have this power than to say that a concept does. We will deal further on with the difficult question of how to understand religious faith. At this point we need to consider the question whether it is more sensible to say that God has figured in human behavior or that the concept of or belief in God has done so. The distinction is important because if the former is the case then we have sufficient justification to talk about God as prevailing without having to make any prior arguments about God's existence.

Let us face the question directly. God and the belief in God are not the same thing. The latter is a mental or psychological condition, or at least a predisposition to behave in certain ways under certain conditions, while the former is a complex that might in principle be located in, or is locatable in, any number of orders beyond the psychological or behavioral. When people pray, for example, the object of prayer is not their belief in God, but God itself. When people write religious poetry or music, it is in praise not of the belief in God but of God itself. God is the object of these activities, not the belief in God. To say that the object of such activities is a belief or a concept is to twist them into something they are not. In the same way, Biblical or Koranic stories are stories about God, not stories about the concept of or belief in God, just as *Hamlet* is a play about a Danish prince and *Xanadu* is a poem about Kublai Khan. The naturalist has no more reason to be unnerved about

the object of Biblical stories than he or she does about the object of the work of Shakespeare or Coleridge.

If considerations like these are not sufficient to make the point that we may reasonably talk about God rather than simply the belief in or concept of God, perhaps a stronger way to make it would be to emphasize the phenomenological dimension of the experience of God. There are many people for whom God is a presence in their lives. William James more than anyone has demonstrated the many ways that such an experience can occur. There are no doubt psychological dimensions to religious experience, but if we are to avoid reductionism, it is not sufficient to content ourselves by explaining away religious experience in psychological terms any more than we can legitimately explain away the relatively large in terms of the relatively small, or the biological in terms of the chemical, or the social in terms of the individual. Religious experience has an integrity that is not to be denied and there is no philosophical justification for attempting to do so. Just as religious stories have an object, so religious experience has one or more constituents that cannot justifiably be written off. Religious experience is to be taken at face value, and such experience invariably includes some sense of the divine. In some way or other such experiences are about or include God, understood in various ways. They are not simply about beliefs or concepts.

That is not to say that every possible interpretation of religious experiences is equally valid, because interpretation involves other epistemological moves. Analogies may be more or less adequate; inferences may be valid or not; references may be more or less accurate. It is surely the case that in many religious experiences the inference to an appropriate understanding or explanation is replaced by wishful thinking and jumping to conclusions. The phenomenological dimension of religious experience justifies talk about God, but it does not by itself justify the attribution of any specific traits to God. The most we can say based on the reality and integrity of religious experience, which is to say, based solely on the phenomenological level, is that God prevails. To specify the orders in which we may reasonably say that God prevails requires careful philosophical analysis.

God, we may then say, is discriminated, identified, picked out, and to that extent we are justified in talking about God directly. And the orders in which God is so discriminated indicate the respects in which it is ap-

propriate to say that God prevails. To do so is not to equivocate between God and belief in God. It is, on the contrary, to take seriously the fact that it is God about which people write and speak, to which people pray, and which people experience. We are well served to remind ourselves at this point of John Herman Randall's observation that the important question is not whether this or that exists, but how and in what way it exists (Randall 1958, 131). In no case is that insight more important than with respect to God.

Some philosophers in the American pragmatist and naturalist traditions have attempted to develop a conception of God, and of religion, that can sit comfortably within a naturalist world view. Spinoza, perhaps the most important pre-American example, equated God and nature, and for doing so he was attacked for atheism. But Spinoza did manage to maintain a degree of the humility and piety before nature that is characteristic of the humility and piety common in religious experience and observance. Such a sense of piety is often associated with a religious sensibility, and Spinoza's example indicates that what in his case is a natural piety nonetheless captures something distinctive about religious experience.

In the naturalist tradition the first key figure is Santayana, who sought to understand and interpret the power and significance of religion and God, one consistent with naturalist assumptions, through an aesthetic sensibility and a sense of the significance of the symbolic. Dewey, in a more instrumentalist vein, offered an ethical reading of God and religion, understanding and even maintaining the significance of both while at the same time redefining them (Dewey 1934). In Dewey's hands God comes to represent the unification of the ideals that we hold in highest esteem: justice, truth, beauty, wisdom, and benevolence. Randall took a still different approach, wherein both religion and God are understood through the function they serve to provide coherence, meaning and direction for people's lives. In this respect Randall's treatment of religious and theistic themes is consistent with his ontological insight that the important question is not whether this or that exists, but how (Randall 1946).

A fourth approach is taken by John McDermott, who gives the whole set of issues what we might call a literary twist. McDermott often makes the claim that there is no "canopy of explanation." This is very much a naturalist's point of view in that it denies that there is an overarching

story that neatly ties reality in a bow and provides whatever meaning we may seek or need. But meaning and significance there still must be. So what exactly is McDermott rejecting when he denies a canopy of explanation or an overarching story? It is not the explanation or the story that he rejects but the canopy. In fact he insists on a multiplicity of stories, and it is in the stories that the important insights and understandings are to be found. And the stories can be anything and come from anywhere; they can be mythical, or heroic, or personal; they can derive from memory, invention, or the will, individual or collective. Whether God survives in this approach is an open question in that the stories may well be stories about God, but the function of God surely survives, as does the significance of a more traditional religious understanding (McDermott 1976; 1986; 2007).

Another approach to the questions of God and religion within a pragmatic naturalist framework has come from Robert Corrington, who constructs a theology, in the traditional sense of an articulation of the nature of God and spirit, with the help of the categories of an ordinal ontology. Corrington is well versed, and consequently his theology, though rooted in ordinality, crosses a number of lines of thought, including Spinoza's pantheism and Whitehead's process theology (Corrington 1992; 1994).

It would be valuable at this point to look a bit more closely at an outstanding illustration of a naturalist's approach to religion, and for that purpose we turn to a discussion of Santayana. It is he, more than anyone, whose insights into religion and the religious convey a sense of the subtlety and understanding of which naturalist approaches to religion are capable.

## Santayana

George Santayana laid out the basic principles underlying his conception of religion in a number of his works including *Reason in Religion* (1905), *Platonism and the Spiritual Self* (1927), "Ultimate Religion" (1933), and his novel *Last Puritan* (1935).

For Santayana one's religion is in the first place a kind of language, the language one has as a result of a historical accident. Just as spoken language has to be a particular language; religion has to be a specific relig-

ion. The basis of the particular character of religion by analogy with language can be related to Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction of *langage*, *la langue* and *la parole*. Saussure understands *langage* as "a system of signs that express ideas," which consists of two components: *la langue*, that is the abstract system of language adopted in a given speech community, and *la parole*, that is the concrete and individual act of speech. Santayana sees all religions as positive and particular, as concrete historical forms of general ideas. His view eliminates any justification for competition between religions because particular religions, though limited by their historic nature, reflect the universal character of religion in general. Particular religion is a *langue* expressed in a number of discourses, i.e. *paroles*, while religion per se is "a system of signs" conveying a notion of a broader context beyond the known world:

The vistas it [religion] opens and the mysteries it propounds are another world to live in – whether we expect ever to pass wholly into it or no – is what we mean by having a religion (Santayana 1982, 6).

Religion in the broad sense, while being a "vehicle or a factor in rational life" (Santayana 1982, 6), in its specific forms has some constraints and limits. In *Reason in Religion* Santayana explores, on one hand, rationality and reason in religious thought and, on the other hand, shows the resultant extremes of religious illusions taken literally. First and most important, Santayana neither sets off religion and science, or intelligence, nor religion and social order, or law, even if manifestations of religious belief are far from being efficacious categories of action (Edman 1936, xxvii). On the contrary, he sees their common grounds:

We sometimes speak as if superstition or belief in the miraculous was disbelief in law and was inspired by a desire to disorganise experience and defeat intelligence. No supposition could be more erroneous. Every superstition is a little science, inspired by the desire to understand, to foresee, or to control the real world (Santayana 1982, 22).

Cult, e.g. prayer or sacrifice, is caused by practical feelings of need and fear, and is linked to everyday reality. The practicality of motivations for prayer or sacrifice demolishes the opposition of the supernatural and the natural that is so often based on the presence or absence of rationality and reason. Santayana's conception of religious feeling is in a way an intuitive approach to the dynamic/static dichotomy rooted in Greek vs.



Roman notions of chaos as a creative milieu (Greek), and as the realm of the dead and a place of stagnation (Roman).

Santayana, like other naturalist philosophers who have taken seriously religion and its many issues, also deals with the question of God. When people recognize the existence of an almighty power that exemplifies forces, which govern the fortunes of the psyche, they are led to the belief that "faith is a rival, and more effective, method of thriving than science and rational husbandry" (Hodges; Lachs 2000, 85). For Santayana, who tries to find a way to overcome the constraints inherent in dogmatic forms of religious belief, and determined by their historical contexts, the higher power is not almighty but is *omnificent*, i.e. "the doer of everything that is done" (Santayana 1936a, 285). Discriminating between omnipresence, omnipotence and omnificence, Santayana links omnipotence with stagnated forms of religion and associates ultimate religion with omnipresent and omnificent power that serves as a source of spirituality that is manifested in various phenomena. The omnipotent almighty therefore is a historically and socially constructed idea:

Supernatural, then, as the ideal might seem, and imposed on human nature from above, it was yet accepted only because nothing else, in that state of conscience and imagination, could revive hope; nothing else seemed to offer an escape from the heart's corruption and weariness into a new existence (Santayana 1982, 147).

For Santayana the roots of religion, and of Christianity as a historically determined form, lie in the undeveloped character of human beings that are not weaned from the need for authority:

Man is still in his childhood; for he cannot respect an ideal which is not imposed on him against his will, nor can he find satisfaction in a good created by his own action. He is afraid of a universe that leaves him alone (Santayana 1982, 91).

If religion is understood as omnificent power then the question of the existence of God loses its profundity, indeed its relevance. Proofs of the existence of God are not needed, since God's existence is either obvious or of no religious interest. The concept of God that is connected with moral experience is of great moment, while it is of no religious interest to hold a concept of God as an absolute in the physical world and that is scientifically discoverable in nature or consciousness.

In his discussion of God and God's existence Santayana comes very close to the notion of concepts as dynamic elements of the mental map, combining logic, culture, and linguistic parameters. He distinguishes between knowledge of appearance as a separate entity and knowledge of substance of which the appearance is a sign. Just as concepts are subject to a process of change, "the stuff and texture of knowledge, its verbal and pictorial terms, are flexible and subject to progressive correction. Thus the notion of matter, of God, of human person, may continually vary" (Santayana 1936a, 183–184). As the result, new fresh words can be necessary to designate both a new conception and an old substance. For Santayana it is irrelevant whether substance is called matter, or God, or is given a different name. However, "controversy is misguided if it turns on hypostatizing either idea, and asking which of them exists" (Santayana 1936a, 184). Santayana's answer is that neither does. The very problem of existence is extraneous because "what exists is the substance at work, and this substance is never an idea hypostatized" (Santayana 1936a, 184). What Santayana has in mind is the existence of "concept" in the sense of the later synergetic theories. This in turn explains his negation of an unknowable substance, and that it is unknown is due to the confusion of knowledge with intuition, i.e. with the study of an appearance exclusive of its connection with the substance. The ignorance of this connection and of the processive character of concepts leads to a situation wherein "not only would matter and God disappear from the scene, but the whole past and future would be denied, together with all that flux of experience which social intercourse, psychology, and history presupposes" (Santayana 1936a, 186). The unknowable in Santayana's sense, akin to the "concept" in synergetic theories, is nothing but a process of becoming; it is the formation of the concept that combines both the elements of dynamics and of statics. That is why there is no castelated form of conceptual knowledge:

The existence of this world [...] is certain, or at least it is unquestioningly to be assumed. Experience may explore it adventurously, and science may describe it with precision; but after you have wandered up and down in it for many years, and have gathered all you could of its ways to report, this same world, because it exists substantially and is not invented, remains a foreign thing and a marvel to the spirit; unknowable as a drop of water is unknowable, or unknowable like a person loved (Santayana 1936a, 188).

The aspect of religious belief in its castellated form that Santayana is opposed to is its linkage with human dependence on external higher powers. Experience of human dependence generates moral laws that for Santayana are not the core of religious feeling:

The conditions and the aims of life are both represented in religion poetically, but this poetry tends to arrogate to itself literal truth and moral authority, neither of which it possesses (Santayana 1982, 10).

Religious mythology, when it is erroneously used to substitute for ideal values, in fact conflicts with moral truth. In other words, Santayana divorces mythology and moral truth; he thinks that "rites can seldom be made to embody ideas exclusively moral" (Santayana 1982, 38). Santayana unequivocally distinguishes the spirituality of his ideal ultimate religion from the morality that brings down and narrows the sphere of religious discourse and sees moralities and religions as "dreadful an incubus on the spirit as ever was the animal search for food, love, or safety" (Santayana 1936c, 468). In *The Last Puritan* Santayana makes a metaphorical comparison of the moral order, i.e. attainable degrees of moral life, with Jacob's ladder. However beautiful, the image and the moral order itself are still an imposition on the human mind because there is "an obscure natural order in the universe, controlling morality as it controls health: an order which we do not need to impose, because we are all obeying it willy-nilly" (Santayana 1936b, 314). Viewed from a meta-position and in the context of the universe at large, the moral nature of humankind is no greater than the moral nature of an ant or a mosquito (Santayana 1936b, 316). Therefore, "the attempt to subsume the natural order under the moral is like attempts to establish a government of the parent by the child" (Santayana 1982, 24).

The true/false criterion is inapplicable to the religious discourse in its ideal form since its function, as of poetic discourse, is interpretative. Religious statements are primarily and initially symbolic:

Our worst difficulties arise from the assumption that knowledge of existences ought to be literal, whereas knowledge of existences has no need, no propensity, and no fitness to be literal. It is symbolic spontaneously [...]. What is more evident than that religion, language, all the passions, and science itself speak in symbols; symbols which unify the diffuse processes of nature in adventitious human terms that have an entirely different aspect

from the facts they stand for? In all these regions our thought works in a conventional medium, as the arts do (Santayana 1936a, 134–135).

Interpretations and symbolic knowledge have an advantage over concrete imperceptibles because they do not include occult or supernatural elements. For Santayana, as later for Susan Langer, symbol is the ability to think with the help of *a priori* and rational forms without any premise about the real existence of the object. Religion, like art, is always interpretation, an attempt to catch “the *spirit* of the thing” (Santayana 1936a, 160). On the one hand, an aesthetic element is present in a human being’s thoughts and actions; on the other, art possesses a religious dimension.

Concrete historic forms of religion bounce between poles of fixed laws and of vibrant imagination; the movement along the axis toward the pole of imagination is the movement toward ultimate religion and the life of reason, as “there is more need to stimulate fancy than to control it” (Santayana 1982, 12). “Religion is a form of rational living more empirical, looser, more primitive than art” (Santayana 1982, 33) and the value of religion lies in its poetic character:

Religion remains an imaginative achievement, a symbolic representation of moral reality which may have a most important function in vitalising the mind and in transmitting, by way of parables, the lessons of experience (Santayana 1982, 12).

Viewing magic as the mother of art, Santayana associates religious consciousness with the mythological. Incapacity of the primitive mind to discriminate between the mythical and the scientific brought the mythological forms to life and made irrelevant the distinction between wisdom and myth as religious content (Santayana 1982, 31). Belief, in Santayana’s conception, is removed from the sphere of religion into the sphere of science, as “myths are not believed in, they are conceived and understood” (Santayana 1982, 50). To demand belief in an idea would mean to deny the interpretative function of religious discourse and to assert that the religious idea has scientific truth. Santayana understands myth not as a story but as the specific form of consciousness characterized by a certain perception of time, space and an absence of true/false and reality/fiction oppositions:

Mythology cannot flourish in that dialectical air; it belongs to a deeper and more ingenuous level of thought, when men pored on the world with in-

tense indiscriminate interest, accepting and recording the mind's vegetation no less than that observable in things, and mixing the two developments together in one wayward drama (Santayana 1982, 50).

Developing the idea of religion as a poetic and mythological form of consciousness Santayana emphasizes aesthetic dimension of spiritual life. Santayana's world is built not on morals but on beauty infiltrating every aspect of life. While moral philosophy leaves little room for "aesthetics," Santayana's "ultimate religion" is based on the ideas of beauty and harmony that replace the idea of an almighty God. The things are to be seen from the perspective of the possibility of beauty they invoke. What Santayana argues for is neither religion, as "there is no faith invoked," nor philosophy, as there is no hypothesis about the nature of the universe or knowledge (Santayana 1936a, 295). It is an aesthetic type of consciousness based on the idea of the "eternal beauty, which lies sealed in the heart of each living thing" (Santayana 1936a, 297), that he occasionally, and perhaps misleadingly, calls religion or spirituality.

## **Faith**

Religion has dimensions that concern cosmology, aesthetics, ethics, politics, meaning and purpose. It is small wonder that it has played a central role in the lives of individuals, nations and whole cultures for, it appears, as long as there have been people. Its centrality ebbs and flows, from the more secular character of modern European societies to the theocracies, real and desired, of the Middle East, to the Christian fundamentalism of the US to the political commitments of Zionism. In one way or another religion and religions have been and continue to be prepared to explain and govern every aspect of individuals and our societies.

Though it may seem ironic, we have taken a cue from Santayana in suggesting that the simplest of the many dimensions of religion for the naturalist to deal with is the cosmological and ontological. With respect to cosmology, there is nothing gained in our understanding of the material universe by positing an eternal, supreme being. We understand enough about the workings of physical laws to do a fair job of accounting for physical events in the universe, and we get better at it as we go along. Of course physical laws do not explain the origins of the universe, but then neither does an eternal being. If we can posit an eternal being out-

side nature then we can just as easily posit the eternality of nature. The one is no easier to understand than the other, but for the sake of simplicity of explanation and with a nod to William of Ockham, there is no point in multiplying entities unnecessarily.

Ethics presents no great difficulty either. It is common for non-philosophical theists to assume that ethical principles must have a divine source for them to have any legitimacy, but we know that there is no reason to accept that assumption. Those who assume that there must be a divine or at least absolute source of ethical principles make one of two mistake: either they assume that without an absolute source ethical principles are arbitrary and therefore without sufficient justification, or they reason that without the threat of punishment from a divine source there would be no sufficient reason for people in adequate numbers to take ethical principles seriously.

The response to the first point is of course that there are at least several bases for the justification of ethical principles other than an absolute source, the most obvious of which is consequences. Another is purposes. It is a given of pragmatist thought that we act to achieve something, or as Dewey would put it, with ends in view. In many cases those ends or purposes are related to ideals, and our ideals are in one way or another constructed both individually and collectively. Actions and their purposes, or means and ends, are constitutively related to one another. Ethical principles, like everything else, are complexes the characteristics of which are determined relationally. Both their justification and their force are a function of their relations.

The second point is more easily dispensed with. First, as even theological ethicists will acknowledge, the threat of punishment is not an ethically valuable reason for taking ethical principles seriously. That many people seem to think that it is reflects more the inadequacy of education than the nature of ethical principles. Second, experience demonstrates otherwise because there are many atheists who live normally ethically informed lives. It is safe to say that theists and atheists are equally capable of embodying and transgressing ethical principles.

This is not to say that a naturalist ethics is a simple matter and presents no difficulties. But quantum physics is not easy either and presents all sorts of difficulties, a fact that does not incline us to infer that the better explanation of quantum behavior is divine. The examination of

ethics is no less a natural enterprise than is the examination of material nature.

Certain other aspects of religious belief and life present a range of problems, though they are not philosophical problems. I have in mind psychological questions and social and political issues. The latter can of course be usefully considered by philosophers, for example the relative advantages of secular democracy, or at least a secular polity of some kind, over theocracy. But these questions are also grist for the mill of sociologists and political scientists. In other words, they pose no special problem for naturalist philosophers.

There are, as we have already suggested, questions of meaning and purpose that are in no way trivial. To provide purpose and meaning is perhaps the most important function religion serves. And it is not only a psychological matter. Religious faith can and does provide the glue, we might say, or the general framework that sustains individuals, families and whole communities. The institution of the church or any religious community plays a role here, but it is the belief of its members that conveys the moral authority on the church or community to serve the institutional function that it does. In other words, it is religious faith and belief that serves as the source of meaning and purpose more than the church. Santayana's account of symbol and myth makes this point well.

We know of course that meaning and purpose do not require religious belief, if only because there are many of us who live purposeful and meaning-filled lives without it. But that understanding is shared by relatively few of us, especially in the U.S. and other societies in which religion remains a potent force. Secularism may be more widespread in Europe, but from a global perspective it is still more the exception than the rule. And in any case meaning is a matter of creative construction more than a given of nature.

So the pragmatic naturalist can handle the bulk of issues that arise around religion. With respect to ontology and cosmology, ethics and aesthetics, society and politics, and meaning and purpose, pragmatic naturalism can make sense on its own terms of the religiously oriented questions that have traditionally been posed. But there remains one outstanding question: what do we do in the face of straightforward religious faith?

It is worth taking a moment to think about what religious faith is. I suspect that we typically think of it as rather like any sort of belief, even if more fundamental to people's lives than most or all other beliefs. But this is probably not right. Why, we might ask, do people believe things? In some cases it is a matter of desire. We might believe that our favorite team will win the championship because we wish it to be so. In other cases we might believe something because we judge that there is enough good reason to think it true that we draw our belief more or less like a deductive conclusion. In yet other cases we may believe something because our experience points toward it. But none of these kinds of situations adequately describe religious faith. It is not embraced by believers as a conclusion to an argument, deductive or inductive, nor is it an inference drawn from experience. There is, however, one sense in which faith is wishful thinking, so to speak, and that is the sense in which James deals with it in "The Will to Believe." James makes a compelling case in that essay not for the claim that we ought to believe but for the more modest but nevertheless important claim that given the conditions that apply in the case of religious faith we are rationally justified in doing so if we are so inclined, even in the absence of sufficient evidence. The appropriate conditions, however, do not apply to most cases of belief, and so even with respect to "willing" to believe, religious faith is unlike most other forms of belief (James 1956).

Anselm understood this fact about faith when he described his argument as a case of "faith seeking understanding." James understood it in "The Will to Believe" and in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Randall understood it in his many efforts to provide an account of the function of religious ideas and beliefs in people's lives. And Santayana understood it when he said that myths are conceived, i.e. that mythical thinking is its own conceptual framework. Religious faith, it appears, is not a conclusion but a point of departure, a general framework for dealing with whatever one faces.

Neither the secularist naturalism nor religious faith can "best" the other, so to speak, because neither is an inference. Argument is not relevant at this conceptual level. It is senseless, in other words, for naturalism to seek to refute faith. To attempt to do so is to betray a failure to understand what it is. What it must do, on the contrary, is to recognize as a fully natural phenomenon the fact of religious faith as an alternative framework for many people's lives. This, however, simply sets the prob-



lem for us: naturalism must recognize religious faith as a natural phenomenon, but religious faith, by virtue of some of its content, defeats or at least is inconsistent with the naturalism that wants to acknowledge it.

But perhaps this overstates the problem, or suggests more of a problem than there really is. If there is an inconsistency between faith and naturalism, it arises only insofar as religious faith includes the belief in a being that naturalism cannot incorporate, an absolute God. On the point of this particular belief, however, there is nothing to prevent the naturalist from simply disagreeing and claiming that the belief is mistaken in that the object of the belief does not exist. That is to say, for example, that there is not a God that prevails in the orders of creator *ex nihilo* and ground of nature. To make such a claim would be no different in kind than objecting to any other specific belief, no matter what its object. This would be a problem for naturalism's interest in acknowledging religious faith only if faith were reducible to these specific beliefs. But faith cannot be so reduced.

First, it is possible for faith to involve a belief in a God that is not absolute, in which case there would not necessarily be an inconsistency. If God can be construed as Dewey, Randall or Corrington have done and remain religiously meaningful, then faith that includes such a belief poses no special problem. The possibility and significance of faith in such cases, of a faith that incorporates such a God, becomes a theological rather than a philosophical issue. Second, religious faith involves much more than a set of beliefs, regardless of the traits attributed to the objects of belief, and faith more fully understood presents no problem for naturalism. This is the point that needs development.

We can put the point in a slightly different way. If faith is primarily belief in an absolute creator that stands outside of nature, then it is fundamentally flawed because its defining constituent is a false belief. But must a life lived in faith be a mistake, however psychologically satisfying it may be? This is the question we need to explore if we wish not to dismiss a life lived in faith but to understand its place in nature and in experience.

In what does a life lived in faith consist? The first point to note is that a life of faith is a way of life in the sense that it is about how one lives rather than simply what one believes. There are several characteristics of such a life that taken together make it clear that faith involves much

more than simply this or that belief, even a belief in God. Among the characteristics that should be noticed, a life lived in faith is characterized by trust in other people, by the sense of the actual or possible general “rightness” of things, by a belief in salvation and redemption, by a sense of and commitment to justice, and by a general posture of humility and piety.

There is of course a sense in which social life in general requires some degree of trust. If for example we did not trust the other drivers on the road, or the pilots of the airplanes we fly, or the teachers in our children's schools, then our lives in anything like their present form would not be possible at all. But the trust that characterizes a life of faith goes much deeper. A life defined by trust in other people is not primarily self-interested, or at least is not a selfish life. If one trusts others, for example, then one does not look to manipulate them to meet or fulfill one's own interests. That is not to say that religious faith makes one indifferent to one's own interests, but it does incline one to understand or pursue one's self-interest within the context of the interests of others. To trust in other people is to act in ways that take for granted the moral significance of those around one. It also inclines one to assume, with or without evidence, that for the most part those around one to some extent take your interests to heart. It is to assume a community that is based, usually in unspecified ways, on common concerns and aspirations. For some such a community can be fairly limited in scope, in the sense that it includes a limited number of other people, while for others it can cast a much wider net. Thus for some people their “faith community” is limited to those who share a common confession, while for other people it can genuinely encompass much or all of the world. People whose faith moves them to work in distant and underdeveloped places in the world, for example, can be understood to be moved by a trust in and commitment to others in the latter, broader sense. Whether narrowly or broadly understood, the trust in others that characterizes a life of faith is of this deeper sort that not only enables social life but also defines one's responsibilities within it.

A sense of the “rightness” of things is a second characteristic of the life of faith. What does this mean? Presumably one of the virtues of belief in a God that orders the world is that one can assume that sooner or later, if not already, things are ordered as they should be. This is what Leibniz meant, though he offered the point in technical terms, when he

said that this is the best of all possible worlds. Given all the serious problems we habitually face, from the mundane to the global, it is easy to regard such a view as hopelessly naïve. Voltaire had himself a good time doing just that. It is easy to laugh with Voltaire at Panglossian foolishness, but we ought not to laugh too hard. It is not silly, or even entirely unreasonable, to understand the world as in a process that ultimately will work itself out for the best, either through God's actions or our own. In fact there is a sense in which we must take such a view, at least in a moderate form. Our lives would be dismal indeed without some degree of hope that the future can be an improvement on the present. Without the assumption of such a possibility there would be little reason for us to attempt to do anything constructive at all. It seems that when we act to solve any problem big or small, we necessarily assume that the world and our lives are meliorable. The difference between this common assumption and the person of faith's sense of the "rightness" of things is the difference between meliorism and perfectibility. For most of us we need assume only that our actions can achieve some desirable effect. For the person of faith, however, the world is not only capable of becoming better; it is inevitably becoming perfect, if it is not already. In the abstract this is a very big difference, but it is worth noting that for practical purposes it is more a difference of degree than of kind.

Another dimension of a life lived in faith is the element of salvation or redemption. This is the personal corollary of the previous point. Not only is the world in general capable of perfection, but we as individuals will, in one way or another, be redeemed. Theological traditions have differed on this point. For some salvation is a result of what individuals do, and for others it is a matter for an omnipotent God to determine. Either way, for the faithful, personal salvation is a possibility, and something either to be worked toward or hoped for. A world in which one is not irredeemable is one in which there is hope. A life of faith is a hopeful life; faith imbues life with hope – for oneself, for the future, for "things" in general. As with the other characteristics of a life in faith, there are obvious virtues to a life lived in hope: hopefulness, even on purely pragmatic grounds, is preferable to hopelessness.

Yet another trait of faith is a sense of a pervasive justice in the world. God is typically understood to embody justice himself, and that divine justice is understood by the faithful to pervade God's creation. Those

who live a life of faith take it as a given not only that things happen for reasons, but that the reasons are good ones because the events in the world, and in one's life, add up to something morally desirable. For many people this sense of a cosmic justice is also translated into a personal commitment to justice. Much of classical scripture in many religious traditions is read this way, and whole theologies have been built around the commitment to justice, social and individual, as the cornerstone of a life of faith. In some cases, for example in Christian Liberation Theology, the pursuit of justice that constitutes a life of faith has an overtly political dimension. In other cases the commitment to justice may have more personal and immediate implications than social. In either case, to live a life of faith is to take seriously justice as a trait of creation itself and the commitment to justice as a defining trait of one's life.

We have also mentioned humility and piety as characteristics of faith. A life of faith will be one that avoids an arrogance and aggressiveness toward nature itself and toward other people. If nature is understood to be a divine creation then no other stance than humility towards it can be appropriate. Natural piety, we may say, has a comfortable home in the faithful life. Humility in one's relations with other people is no less a defining trait of faith. From a religious point of view people are no less divine creations than the rest of nature, and that alone calls for humility. In addition, if one is to take seriously the other traits of a life of faith that we have discussed, for example justice and redemption, then consistency if nothing else calls for humility before others. Both humility and piety are expressions of a faith in the importance and inherent value of one's surroundings, of the environment in which one finds oneself. If I approach the world around me, and the people with whom I share it, as inherently valuable, then I can have no other attitude than humility toward them.

Religious faith, then, is far more than a particular belief or even set of beliefs. It consists in addition of a set of attitudes towards the world, towards other people, and towards one's own life that govern the decisions one makes, the actions one takes, and in general the life one lives. Faith is, therefore, not so much a set of beliefs as a way of life. Specifically, it is a way of life that embodies trust, hope, justice, rightness, humility and redemption.

For traditional religious faith this way of life and the traits that constitute it are bound up with a belief in a creator God. If a creator God,

indeed anything non-natural, is impossible, as we have argued, what happens to our understanding of a life lived with these characteristics? Or to ask again our overarching question, how are we to understand faith?

There are three logical possibilities: 1) A life so lived is impossible without a creator God; 2) Such a life can be coupled with a God differently understood, one that makes sense within a natural world; and 3) Such a life can be lived without any conception of God. The first of these possibilities is false on the face of it. It is certainly possible to live a life of trust, hope, commitment to justice, humility and redemption without a creator God, or without belief in one. It happens all the time, and the fact that it happens all the time is the basis, we might add, for the common ground that believers and non-believers have with respect to many important individual and social issues.

The second possibility speaks to the whole field of naturalist theology to which we referred earlier. Whether any of the various conceptions of God that have been developed by naturalist theologians are religiously compelling is a question for others to answer. There is, as we have said, nothing necessarily inconsistent about a theology developed within a naturalist philosophical framework. It remains the task of the naturalist theologian to indicate both the nature of a natural God and the character of the religious life, or faith, within such a conceptual framework.

The third possibility is, as we have already hinted in our response to the first, the central point that needs to be made about an understanding of faith appropriate to a philosophical naturalism. A life of faith is both possible and can make perfectly good sense independent of religious belief. Faith, in other words, is not something the naturalist needs to ignore, dismiss, explain away, or in any way fear. The point is not that we *ought* to live a life of faith. One lives one's life as one sees fit, and other things being equal there is not much to be gained by dictating to people how they ought to live. The point is, rather, that the way of life that we have described as constituting a life of faith makes perfectly good sense on naturalist principles. There are, if nothing else, good pragmatic reasons. A life that is hopeful and committed to justice is more likely to achieve some measure of satisfaction and "rightness" than a life of despair and cynicism. Redemption and salvation too have pragmatic value. Even when divorced from their more cosmic and eternal religious forms

of expression, to understand ourselves, our lives and our world as savable, as redeemable, is in fact a necessary condition for acting such that we bring about better conditions than we currently have. And humility and natural piety are not only possible independent of religious belief, but given the current state of our environment and our social and political relations, they may be necessary if we wish not to destroy ourselves and our world.

Faith, in other words, makes perfectly good sense, and a life so lived may in fact be one that a naturalist can comfortably recommend. We recognize of course that for the religious believer the meaning and import of his faith is related to a belief in a divine creator and presence. To that extent a religious life of faith and a similar secular life are different. But they are not as different as one might have supposed. In fact they are similar enough that the naturalist and the believer have a great deal of common ground. Thus despite the rejection of a religious belief in God, the naturalist can recognize without difficulty the character, meaning and import of faith as a constituent of nature and of a life understood and lived on naturalist principles.

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